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## CHAPTER 4

### **A Principled, Personalized, Trusting, and Child-Centric ECEC System in Finland**

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Finland's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system is rooted in a historic social welfare model that values universalism and social rights while advancing a fervent commitment to equality and equity. At its core, the Finnish ECEC system reflects a powerful narrative predicated on principled, personalized, and child-centric services.

### **Values and Vision**

The legacy of the Finnish welfare model—a value proposition and strategy that developed over three key periods in the nation's history—is central to the conceptualization and design of the nation's present ECEC system. From the Middle Ages to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Finland was part of the kingdom of Sweden, which led to Swedish legal and social systems taking root. This era ended in 1809 when Finland was ceded to Russia, becoming an autonomous grand duchy wherein Finnish language, culture, and economy continued to develop. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Russian restrictions on Finnish autonomy sparked the emergence of a budding nationalist movement. Finland ultimately secured independence during the final phases of World War I, when, on December 6, 1917, the nascent nation's declaration of independence was formally approved by the Parliament of Finland.

Today, Finland is a parliamentary republic with a population of just over 5.5 million people, about 20% of whom are under the age of 18 (Vipunen Education Statistics Finland, 2017). Although 2016 marked the sixth consecutive year of declining birth rates, the country's population is on the rise due to migration (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017a). The majority of the population (about 89%) speak Finnish as their mother tongue; Swedish and Sami, the other two official languages of Finland, are spoken by 5.3% and 0.1% of the population, respectively. Foreign languages spoken in the country include Russian, Estonian, Arabic, Somali, and English (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b). Largest religious community is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, constituting with membership covering 72% of the population. About a quarter of Finns (1.3 million people) are not registered with any religious group (Ketola, Hytönen, Salminen, Sohlberg, & Sorsa, 2016).

### **ECEC Policy Framework**

Broadly, Finnish society and policies are based on three core principles associated with the Nordic welfare model: *universalism* (i.e., social welfare programs for all citizens), *social rights* (i.e., citizenship as a basis of entitlement), and *equality* (i.e., equal access to services) (Miettinen, 2013).

Despite Finland's market-based economy, the state plays an important role in developing and managing welfare policies and services. The government's responsibility to provide education, health, welfare, and security is written into the Finnish Constitution, so that citizens are guaranteed the right to income and care.

These values are also reflected in the nation's embrace of a collective responsibility for young children, manifest in diverse policies that have emerged over time. For instance, legislation passed as early as 1938 provided dedicated maternity boxes to every Finnish newborn; eight years later, a formal child benefit scheme was put in place. In 1973, local authorities were given a statutory obligation to provide day care for children under school age, with child care leave policies (1989), day care and home care allowances (1990), and private day care allowances (1997) following soon thereafter. Sustaining this policy commitment, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the emergence of free preschool education provided for all 6-year-olds (2001) and paternal leave raised to 54 working days (2013). Today, universal and integrated ECEC services ensure that children and their families, wherever they live and whatever their social, economic, ethnic, or cultural background, have access to an array of nationally defined, universally offered ECEC services.

## **Range of Services**

### **General Services**

In Finland, there are several types of universal services and allowances provided to all children under 18 years old and their families.

### **Prenatal and Perinatal Services**

Prenatal and perinatal services for children, mothers, and families are publically available and free of charge throughout the country. During pregnancy, health clinics monitor and promote the health and well-being of women through a range of services, including ultrasounds and amniotic fluid fetal chromosome tests. Deliveries are generally managed by hospitals, which have facilities and resources for enhanced supervision of mothers and babies, including the capacity to perform emergency C-sections. After a child is born, both the child's development and mother's and family's well-being are monitored at a health clinic via regular checks-ups. Parenting and family counseling services covering topics such as breast-feeding, nutrition, and child development are universally available.

### **Child Health Services**

Regular check-ups at health clinics are provided by qualified clinical staff who monitor and document children's physical, physiological, mental, and social development based on nationally defined standards. During these health and well-being checks, parents are given information on vitamins and nutrition, and advised how to promote children's healthy development at home. Printed and digital materials on parenting and child development and well-being are also widely available. Dental care and a national vaccination program are offered to all children.

Typically, a child's health and development will be monitored weekly in their first month of life, with monthly monitoring continuing for the remaining 11 months of their first year. Thereafter, health and development checks are conducted annually until the age of 6. When a child enters primary school, in-house nurses and doctors continue to monitor his or her healthy development and well-being on an annual basis.

### **Parental Leave**

Various types of publicly funded parental leave are available in Finland. Pregnant women have the right to 105 paid working days (i.e., Monday to Saturday) of maternity leave. Additionally, fathers can take 54 working days of paternity leave after their child's birth, 18 of which may be used while

the mother is on maternity leave. Following this, either the mother or father can take a further parental leave of 158 working days after the maternity leave period ends, with an extension of 60 working days for each child in the case of multiple births (i.e., twins, triplets).

Parental leave allowance is taxable, means-tested, and based on parents' income, with a minimum payment of about \$28<sup>1</sup> (€23.73) per working day covered by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (KELA) for those with no or little income. For a parent with an annual income of \$71,000 (€60,000), the payment rises to about \$136 (€115.66) per working day.

### **Home Care Allowance**

After the parental leave period ends, parents have the right to take unpaid leave from work until the child reaches the age of 3; during this time, they are supported by KELA through a taxable home care allowance. For one child under the age of 3, or one newly adopted child over the age of 3, the allowance is about \$401 (€342.53) per month. For each additional child under the age of 3, the allowance is approximately \$120 (€102.55), and for each additional child under school age, the allowance is

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<sup>1</sup> All currency rates of this case study are calculated according to the information provided by Bank of Finland and European Central Bank, November 3, 2017, accessed from [https://www.suomenpankki.fi/fi/Tilastot/valuuttakurssit/taulukot/valuuttakurssit\\_taulukot\\_fi/valuuttakurssit\\_today\\_fi/](https://www.suomenpankki.fi/fi/Tilastot/valuuttakurssit/taulukot/valuuttakurssit_taulukot_fi/valuuttakurssit_today_fi/)



about an additional \$77 (€65.89). Low-income families may also apply for an income-based child care supplement, which has a maximum value of about \$215 (€183.31) per month.

### **Child-Benefit Scheme (Child Allowance)**

Finland's monthly tax-free child benefit scheme was established in 1948 as part of the Nordic welfare model. Also called a child allowance, it is provided by KELA to parents of all children under 17, regardless of income (KELA, 2017a). In 2017, the benefit for the first child was \$112 (€95.75) per month, the second about \$124 (€105.80), the third about \$158 (€135.01), the fourth about \$181 (€154.64), and the fifth or any additional child about \$204 (€174.27). For example, a family consisting of two adults and three children would altogether receive about \$394 (€336.56) per month, tax-free. In addition, single parents receive a supplement of about \$53 (€45.30) per month per child (KELA, 2017b).

### **Services for Children with Special Needs**

Children diagnosed with special needs and/or a disability based on the judgment of ECEC and health care professionals are entitled to special services and assistance free of charge. Depending on a child's particular needs, these services may include transportation or access to a personal assistant or

facilities/devices to help the child engage more fully in day-to-day life. Generally, children with special needs and/or disabilities are placed with typically developing children in mainstream ECEC groups and provided with additional support, although ECEC services can also be arranged in special groups consisting of only children with disabilities. Children with severe disabilities are also entitled to medical rehabilitation funded by KELA.

To coordinate services and assistance mechanisms for a child with disabilities, relevant authorities from KELA, health, welfare, and/or education, in conjunction with parents, create an individualized support plan that covers the child's needs. Typically, children are also assigned a contact person who will liaise between the family and various authorities, fostering coordination among them. In addition, not-for-profit NGOs and the municipal ombudsman for social services are available to help support these children and their families. Parents of children with special needs are also eligible for financial benefits from KELA, including a disability allowance for children under the age of 16 and a special care allowance.

### **ECEC Services**

All children between the ages of 0 and 6 have a universal right to ECEC services, which may take the form of center-based,

family-based, or open services. Importantly, only the final year (pre-primary) is compulsory, followed by primary education beginning the year children turn 7. Though both are compulsory, pre-primary education is considered part of ECEC, whereas primary education is part of basic education, which extends through secondary education. As pre-primary education is only half-day, most 6-year-old children in Finland also use other ECEC services in their pre-primary year. A key principle framing Finnish ECEC services is parental choice, which is actualized by the availability of a wide variety of ECEC options, as discussed in the following subsections.

### **Center-Based ECEC**

The most common form of ECEC provision in Finland is center-based ECEC. These centers typically operate from 6:15 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on weekdays, although some centers provide evening, 24-hour, and/or seven-day care (known as round-the-clock care). In center-based ECEC, children are generally organized into age groups of 0-3 years old and 3-5 years old. Six-year-olds form a separate group, as they attend a pre-primary education program.

Center-based ECEC is offered by municipalities, municipality-outsourced ECEC providers, and private ECEC providers. Private ECEC service providers can be either for-

profit or not-for-profit and may specialize in particular activities (e.g., languages, arts, sports) or advance a specific pedagogical approach (e.g., Montessori, Reggio Emilia). Regardless of these differences, all ECEC service providers must meet Finnish legal requirements for the provision of ECEC. Namely, they must adhere to quality measures, such as the national core curriculum, adult-child ratios, professional qualifications, and staffing patterns and structures. The municipality and Regional Administrative State Agencies (AVIs) are jointly responsible for overseeing the provision of all ECEC programs in their area.

### **Family-Based ECEC**

Family-based ECEC, another publicly available service, provides care and education to small groups of children aged 0-6 years old in a home-like environment. Such care is typically organized at the ECEC caregiver's home or at a child's home; it is offered by municipalities, municipality-outsourced ECEC providers, or private, for-profit ECEC providers. Requirements for family-based ECEC services are the same as for center-based services. Operating hours are generally defined by the needs of participating children and families, although the total length of daily service is usually eight to nine hours. Despite the advantage of flexibility that family-based ECEC offers, the past

ten years have seen a gradual decrease in the number of such offerings. In 2013, family-based ECEC accounted for only 15% of the total market, compared to 74% for center-based ECEC (Kumpulainen, 2015).

### **Open ECEC Services**

There are various types of open ECEC services offered by municipalities, municipality-outsourced ECEC providers, or private ECEC providers (both for-profit and not-for-profit). While these vary among municipalities, they might include a combination of the following: playground clubs, family houses, and “park auntie” activities. Playground clubs, the most popular modality, can be found throughout the country in nearly all municipalities.

**Playgroup Club Activities.** Playgroup club activities operate in municipality-run playgrounds or on the premises of ECEC centers, and are intended for children in home care from age 2 to the beginning of pre-primary education. Activities are free of charge and operate for about three hours per day, usually from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., up to four days in a week. Supervised by city-employed ECEC caregivers, activities typically include play, singing, and physical exercise. There may also be mother/father and child activities, language courses

for migrant parents, sleep guidance, baby massages, infant family activities, and outdoor recreational and sports activities. Some cities may outsource playgroup club activities; Helsinki, for instance, provides service vouchers worth about \$117 (€100) per month that families can use to pay for activities organized by private service providers.

**Family Houses.** Municipality-organized family houses (i.e., community centers) offer many services for families with small children, including drop-in, temporary child care services; resident-oriented activities; and various courses and group meetings for parents and ECEC professionals. Family houses also distribute information on child care and child development. Both parks and family houses offer families the opportunity to meet other families and share experiences of everyday life.

**Park Auntie Activities.** Park auntie programs offer short-term care in the mornings for children under the age of 6. Activities may include singing, playing, and physical exercise, supervised by playground supervisors or park aunties (i.e., ECEC caregivers) employed by the city. Parents may choose to take part in the activities, or simply drop off their child with the ECEC caregiver for a few hours. In the park, the children are

free to play as they wish, although the park auntie may assist or participate.

**Other ECEC Activities.** In addition to municipality-organized ECEC services, local churches, NGOs, and cultural institutions (e.g., libraries, museums, science centers, community groups, religious communities) provide open ECEC services for young children and their families. Municipalities and private bodies also offer various forms of physical and sports activities. Some of the activities, such as many sports clubs, are fee-based, although there are also supervised activities free of charge.

#### **Participation in ECEC Services for Children Aged 0-5**

Although Finland provides extensive access to free ECEC services, there are significant differences in the participation rates among children of different ages. Children become more likely to participate in center-based ECEC as they grow older, with rates rising from 0.8% for those under the age of 1, to 29% for 1-year olds, 52% for 2-year-olds, 59% for 3-year-olds, and 75% for 4- to 6-year-olds (Kumpulainen, 2015). These statistics reflect the robust support mechanisms and incentives that are available to enable parents to take care of their child at home in the child's first three years (Sipilä, Rantalaiho, Repo, &

Rissanen, 2012). The home care allowance is particularly popular among parents with low levels of education and income, and immigrant families (Pölkki & Vornanen, 2016; Repo 2009, 2010). Emergent policy proposals, however, aim to alter ECEC fees, the child home care allowance, and the child care leave length in order to increase under-3-year-olds' participation in ECEC (Karila, Kosonen, & Järvenkallas, 2017). These potential changes challenge the basic principle of parental choice and potentially signal that the children of unemployed, low-income, and/or immigrant families are "at risk" and require institutional ECEC services.

### **Pre-primary Education**

Pre-primary education, which typically begins in the autumn of the year a child turns 6, is designed to support children's learning, development, well-being, and smooth transition to school. Although pre-primary education was made compulsory in 2015, attendance rates prior to this change were already high, hovering above 98% (Kumpulainen, 2015). Today, compulsory pre-primary education is organized for 700 hours per academic year, or about four hours per day. With costs fully covered by the state, it is provided free of charge to children, including all materials and meals. In addition, children who live over five kilometers from their pre-primary education provider, or who



live where the route is dangerous, are entitled to free transport (OPH, 2017a).

All Finnish pre-primary education follows both the national core curriculum and a local curriculum; individualized education plans are also created for each child. Approximately 80% of pre-primary students are enrolled in services organized by ECEC centers, with the remaining 20% participating in pre-primary education on the premises of primary schools (Kumpulainen, 2015). About 6-8% of children attend pre-primary education offered by private, for-profit ECEC providers, situated either in schools or ECEC centers (T. Kumpulainen, personal communication, November 2, 2017). Privately organized pre-primary education, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, must follow the national core curriculum and meet all Finnish legal requirements and standards.

### **Recent Trends and Changes in ECEC Provision**

**Increasing For-Profit ECEC Provision.** Traditionally, ECEC services have been provided as part of the universal services organized by municipalities, and funded by a combination of public support from the state and municipalities, and parent fees. This is changing, however, as more for-profit providers emerge, particularly in urban areas, with the goal of promoting

diversity, parent choice, and cost reduction (Ruutiainen, 2016). Nonetheless, the Finnish for-profit ECEC sector is still small (about 10%) and primarily dominated by three main providers, which are able to benefit from economies of scale and reduced overhead costs (J. Lahtinen, personal communication, August 11, 2017). There are persistent criticisms regarding the involvement of for-profit ECEC providers, particularly regarding the possible creation of inequalities between children (Ruutiainen, 2016).

**Legal Change.** Spurred by economic challenges, the ECEC law that came into effect in August 2016 has, for the first time in national history, removed children's right to equal access to ECEC regardless of their family's economic position or engagement in the labor market. Now, children whose parents are not students or full-time workers have only a 20-hour per week entitlement to ECEC, and have no right to part-time ECEC beyond their compulsory participation in pre-primary education. Previously, no such restrictions existed, allowing all children to participate in full-time ECEC. Moreover, this law increased the adult-child ratio in 3-year-old ECEC groups to one adult for every eight children (from 1:7). Driven by the need to reduce public expenditures, this change has heightened public concern because it contradicts research evidence and Finland's historic

commitment to social equity. Indeed, it appears to weaken children's equal rights to ECEC, particularly for children who come from more vulnerable families (Karila et al., 2017).

### **Primary Education**

All children in Finland must attend primary school starting in the year they turn 7, through age 12. As part of the Finnish basic education system, primary education is free of charge, with no cost for materials, meals or, when applicable, transport. It is typically provided in municipality-run schools and follows the national core curriculum for basic education, meeting minimum requirements for the organization of time and delivery of the curriculum. For example, every child attending grades 1 (age 7) and 2 (age 8) has the right to receive at least 19 hours of primary education a week, with school days no longer than five hours. As school days typically end earlier than parents' working hours, many children who attend grades 1 and 2 also participate in after-school clubs (Kuntaliitto, 2017).

There are only a small number of private primary schools in Finland, serving less than 2% of children. Private primaries must acquire a license from the Finnish National Agency for Education; if granted, the school receives government funding but, unlike private ECEC services, cannot make a profit (OPH, 2017b).

## **Systemic/Structural Components**

### **Structural Components**

#### **Governance**

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health share responsibility for services for young children and their families, with the former responsible for ECEC and the latter responsible for services that deal with children's health and welfare. This dynamic was established in 2013, when, to emphasize the educational role of ECEC, purview was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture. Although no formal inter-ministerial coordination agency exists, the ministries and their officials collaborate, exchange knowledge, and form working groups when needed.

The governance of ECEC in Finland is also divided between national and municipal levels. National-level governance by the Ministry of Education and Culture involves national policymaking, financing, minimum standard setting, curriculum framework development, and national monitoring, whereas municipal-level governance covers local financing, curriculum

specification, and local monitoring of ECEC services. At present, there are 311 self-governing municipalities in Finland that collect municipal taxes and hold legal responsibility for organizing public services, such as ECEC, for residents. In addition, there are six Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs) in Finland. These agencies work in close collaboration with municipalities in order to ensure regional equality, such as universal access to basic public services including ECEC and health care. This is realized by AVIs carrying out executive, steering, and supervisory tasks laid down in the law.

### **Finance**

The share of GDP dedicated to ECEC services in Finland is higher than the OECD average (1.3% compared to 0.8%), and most spending on ECEC comes from public funding. Annual ECEC expenditure per child for children under 3 is also above the OECD average (about \$12,092, compared to \$8,070). The same applies to children over 3 years, where the expenditure per child is about \$10,477, compared to the OECD average of about \$8,704 (OECD, 2016b).

Generally, ECEC services for children aged 0-6 years old are funded jointly by the central government, municipality, and parents. Notably, state funding to municipalities is not earmarked to ECEC but rather covers all public services that

municipalities are legally required to deliver, allowing flexibility in the way they expend state funds. Funding to municipalities is allocated according to a means-tested formula that takes into account the number and age of residents, employment rates, and immigration rates and patterns. Municipalities then co-finance and administer the state's funding for public services, including ECEC, while taking parental contributions into consideration. Though there is some local variation in parent fees for ECEC services, national law stipulates the maximum amount that may be charged to parents which, in 2017, was about \$339 (€290) per month for full-day provision (Kuntaliitto, 2017). Parent fees are typically means-tested depending on the size and income of the family, and generally cover around 13% of total municipal ECEC budgets, with the rest coming from the state and municipality (J. Lahtinen, personal communication, August 11, 2017).

In the private sector (both for-profit and not-for-profit), ECEC fees are set by providers, and are typically higher than in the public sector, as they are unregulated. To lessen the burden on parents, KELA offers both private day care allowances and income-adjusted care supplements to families who choose to place their children in private ECEC provision. In addition, some municipalities or cities, such as Helsinki, may pay for additional private care support to parents (City of Helsinki,

2017) due to a shortage of municipality-run ECEC centers in the face of growing demand.

Though part of municipal basic services, pre-primary and basic education receive full public funding from the state. Finland's public expenditure on education (excluding ECEC) is 6.8% of GDP, which is the second only to Sweden (7.1%) among EU member states (Eurostat, 2017).

## **Instructional Components**

### **Curriculum Framework Overview**

Finland's national curriculum framework for ECEC covers children between the ages of 0 and 5. Though separate curricula exist for pre-primary and primary education, all three are designed to ensure quality, equity, and effectiveness, and are thematically linked to support children's continuous learning. The curricula are the responsibility of the Finnish National Agency for Education and are developed in partnership with a range of stakeholders, experts, and citizens, including educational policymakers, teachers and other ECEC professionals, families, trade unions, professional organizations, and research communities.

### **Theoretical Underpinning of the Curricula**

The Finnish ECEC curriculum and pre-primary curriculum are pedagogically underpinned by a recognition of the intrinsic value of childhood and an emphasis the importance of play for development and learning. Drawing on socio-constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning and development, they incorporate children's own cultures, previous experience, knowledge, skills, and personal interests as important building blocks (OPH, 2016a; OPH, 2016b). Learning is considered a holistic process in which actions, emotions, sensory perceptions, and bodily experiences interact. As a result, the ECEC curriculum does not set specified learning or performance targets for children under age 6; instead, it promotes child-centered pedagogy and humanistic values inspired by the Froebelian approach (Froebel, 1887), which fosters children's agency and autonomy. Simultaneously, there is an emphasis on encouraging social interactions and relationships and creating a sense of community among children, ECEC staff, families, and the local community (OPH, 2016a; OPH, 2016b).

### **Content of the Curricula**

The content of the Finnish ECEC curricula, including pre-primary education, is organized into five core entities (OPH, 2016a). These cover: (i) *Diverse forms of expression*, including music, visual arts, crafts, and physical and verbal expression;



(ii) *Rich world of language*, including linguistic skills and competencies, and language as a tool for thinking, expression, and interaction; (iii) *Me and our community*, aiming to help children understand themselves and others while appreciating diversity in society; (iv) *Exploring and interacting with my environment*, addressing the development of children's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) skills; and (v) *I grow and develop*, addressing physical activity, food and nutrition, and consumer skills, as well as health and safety issues.

Each of these five areas is framed by the concept of transversal competence—knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and will that support personal growth, lifelong learning, working life, and civic activity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Importantly, many transversal competencies are promoted in the Finnish education system across the age spectrum, from ECEC to the end of compulsory schooling, thereby providing crucial learning continuity. These include: thinking and learning skills; cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression; skills to take care of oneself and manage daily life; multi-literacy and participation and involvement in civil society; and, from preschool onwards, information and communication technology skills.

## **Adaptations to the Curriculum**

**Local Adaptations.** Each municipality is responsible for developing a modified local curriculum for each level of education, beginning with ECEC, that adheres to the provisions of the national core curriculum (OPH, 2016a; OPH, 2016b; OPH, 2017b). When preparing this local curriculum, the municipality and local ECEC program service providers (both public and private) specify the language(s) of instruction; structure, topics, form, and evaluation; strategies for family and community participation and communication; and plans to promote equity and equality. They also strategize for cooperation with other partners and stakeholders in the community, including ECEC providers, basic education teachers, and professionals in the health care and social welfare sectors.

**Adapting for Individual Children.** Every child attending ECEC (including pre-primary education) has the right to an Individual Education Plan (IEP) (OPH, 2016a; OPH, 2016b), which tailors the national and local curriculum to support their personal learning, development, and well-being in culturally and contextually sensitive ways. IEPs state goals and means for ECEC for each child, and list any additional support required. Each plan is co-constructed by the ECEC teachers, parents, the child,

and sometimes other social welfare professionals, who meet at the beginning of every year. It is then revisited with the parents and child at least twice a year.

### **Transitions**

Under the Finnish national core curriculum, much attention is accorded to helping children transition smoothly from pre-primary into school. Pre-primary providers are required to collaborate with children's former or future education providers to share relevant information about each child (OPH, 2016a; OPH, 2016b). A number of transition efforts—which are planned and evaluated by teachers, parents, and the child—may take place throughout the pre-primary year (Kumpulainen et al., 2015). They may include: school visits by children, parent-child-teacher meetings, parents' evenings, setting-specific targets for each child's school readiness in their IEPs, the transfer of child-created portfolios between pre-primary and primary education, and the nomination of an older "sibling" to help the transitioning child with orientation and school work. As children in Finland typically attend the local primary school nearest their home, pre-primary school students often know in advance which school they will be attending. Furthermore, as has been discussed previously, children experience a continuity of curriculum and pedagogy which facilitates their transition and

minimizes the challenges often associated with transition. In these diverse ways, Finland creates structural continuity for children and recognizes the importance of transitions through purposeful activities and planning.

### **Assessment of Learning and Development**

Although there are no early learning performance requirements or outcome specifications for children's learning and development in ECEC, teachers are required to systematically observe and document how their pedagogical work fosters each child's learning; moreover, they are required to factor these observations into planning future activities. This formative assessment needs to take account of the general objectives established by the ECEC curriculum, along with individual objectives outlined in children's IEPs. Throughout the year, teachers provide parents with regular feedback on their child's progress. Moreover, as an indication of the trust accorded children, providers are required to promote children's own capabilities for evaluating their learning; the ability to self-assess by children is considered a core competency for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (OPH, 2016a).

Furthermore, all children's development and well-being is monitored and supported by health clinics and school health care teams during annual medical examinations. Other services, such

as immunizations, are also provided free of charge and enjoy wide public support and uptake (Wiss, Frantsi-Lankia, Pelkonen, Saaristo, & Ståhl, 2014).

### **Program Quality**

The national policy definitions (e.g., *Act on Early Childhood Education and Care* 36/1973) and *Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care* (OPH, 2016a; OPH 2016b), as well as local policy definitions and plans, provide the basis for program quality in ECEC. The minimum regulatory standards cover areas including maximum permitted group sizes (e.g., 20 pre-primary children if two adults are present, or 13 if one is present) and staff qualifications (e.g., one-third of staff in ECEC centers must have a higher education degree in ECEC). Staff:child ratios are also strictly regulated. For instance, in center-based ECEC, one adult must be present for every four children aged 0-3, and for every eight children aged 3-5. Furthermore, all ECEC providers are required to use their local curriculum and develop an IEP for each child.

The responsibility of monitoring ECEC program quality rests with municipalities and AVIs. Because monitoring takes place at the local level, there is no shared national criteria for program quality in ECEC in Finland (Karila, 2016). This lack of a national quality framework, along with limited training on

monitoring program quality, poses a challenge. It is anticipated, however, that program evaluations of ECEC services will become increasingly systematized, as in 2015 the National Evaluation Center (FINEEC) was made responsible for formulating four-year plans for the execution of national evaluations on program quality in Finnish ECEC.

### **Professional Preparation and Development**

**ECEC Workforce Requirements.** Compared to other OECD countries, Finland's requirements for the pre-service training of ECEC staff are relatively rigorous (OECD, 2016b). For example, at least one-third of staff working with children aged 0-6 in center-based ECEC in Finland must have a bachelor's degree or equivalent in early childhood education (i.e., they must be ECEC teachers). Generally, center-based ECEC teams are comprised of at least three different types of ECEC staff: *educational staff* (ECEC teachers and special needs ECEC teachers) who are qualified at a tertiary level (typically bachelor or master's level in ECEC) (ISCED 6-7); *care staff* with a minimum qualification at post-secondary non-tertiary level in health and welfare (ISCED 4-5); and *auxiliary staff*, who usually have a minimum qualification at the upper secondary level (ISCED 3) (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2012).

Officially, ECEC teachers have primary responsibility for pedagogy and curriculum delivery in center-based ECEC, with assistance provided by other members of the staff. In reality, however, the comparative roles and responsibilities of ECEC teachers and the rest of ECEC workforce are blurred, which has led to calls for clarification on job descriptions and management/leadership structures in the workplace (Karila & Kinos 2010; Karila & Kupila, 2010; Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, & Kalliala, 2015). Initiatives are also underway to increase the number of ECEC teachers with pedagogical expertise, as the requirements of the new ECEC curriculum cannot be met by the current care-focused professional structure (Karila et al., 2017). Qualification requirements in family-based ECEC and open day care services are lower than for center-based ECEC, as they do not require any ECEC staff to have a tertiary-level education in ECEC. The minimum requirement is a post-secondary, non-tertiary level education in health and/or welfare.

Directors of ECEC centers, or directors of ECEC services who work at the municipality level and manage all ECEC services (both center-based and family-based) must have, at minimum, a tertiary level degree in health or welfare and extensive work experience in the field. ECEC directors increasingly have a bachelor's, master's, and/or doctoral degree in ECEC.

**Pre-service Teacher Education.** The pre-service ECEC teacher education program typically lasts between 3-4 years, and consists of 180 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), with an additional 60 ECTS in special needs education required for those who wish to become special needs ECEC teachers. The aims of the ECEC teacher education program are ambitious and demanding, with an emphasis on both theory and practice in pedagogical studies. The education includes supervised field practice in different ECEC programs, including pre-primary classrooms, and an emphasis on the integration of research. This is aimed at teachers developing their own practical theory and adopting a research-oriented attitude toward their work. Typically, field practice accounts for 15 ECTS of the full program of 180 ECTS.

Entrance into ECEC teacher education programs is highly competitive, as the university-level degree and nature of the teaching profession attract many young people into the profession. Flexibility in pedagogical methods and materials also proves to be an attractive aspect of the work, as teachers are considered “co-designers” of children’s learning, together with the child, family, and community. Interestingly, despite the profession’s popularity, average salaries of ECEC teachers in Finland are below the OECD average (OECD, 2016a; OECD, 2016b).



**In-Service Teacher Education.** Continuing professional development (CPD) for the ECEC workforce is the responsibility of the municipality, though it is offered by diverse providers including the municipality itself; private, for-profit providers; regional agencies; universities; and research institutions. With no existing national legislation governing CPD opportunities for ECEC, the nature and amount of CPD is left to the determination of the municipalities. Some estimates put the average amount at three to ten days annually per ECEC staff member, the cost of which may be met by the municipality or employer (Lastentarhanopettajaliitto, 2017).

Although municipalities have the major responsibility for CPD, the National Agency of Education coordinates a national network for developing ECEC, which includes a professional development ECEC taskforce operating within and across regions and municipalities. The national network provides opportunities for the sharing of information and ideas related to research, good practice, and networking.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

The Finnish national core curricula for ECEC, pre-primary, and basic education stress cooperation between the child's home and ECEC setting staff. This perspective is predicated on the belief that a foundation for constructive dialogue between

everyone involved in a child's life enhances his or her overall development and well-being (OPH, 2016a). For example, the co-construction of the IEP creates an important basis for parent-teacher partnerships, which are further strengthened by parent-staff conferences and parents' evenings.

Although the primary focus of parental engagement is supporting individual children's development, parents are also invited to participate in activities that contribute to the broader development of ECEC in the local context, through participation in parent/board associations, input into the local curriculum, and participation in its evaluation. In fact, the renewed law on early childhood education (Early Childhood Education and Care Act, 36/1973), which came into effect in 2015, reinforces the rights of both parents and children in the planning, execution, and evaluation of ECEC. Children's views are taken into account in a variety of ways (e.g., by asking children to share their experiences of the activities organized for them in multimodal ways) so as to simultaneously support self-expression and language skills (OPH, 2016a).

To foster community outreach, the core curricula of ECEC, pre-primary, and basic education require that providers collaborate with other organizations and stakeholders, such as libraries, science centers, museums, cultural centers, and sports facilities/programs. Municipalities and the National

Agency for Education also encourage and support collaboration via development grants and professional development programs to ensure alignment with national policies and encourage links between cultural and educational institutions and communities (OPH, 2016a; OPH, 2016b). In 2016, the development projects funded by the National Agency of Education focused on, among other things: developing learning environments and pedagogy for ECEC; promoting children's digital literacies and creativity; pedagogical leadership; implementation of the new ECEC curriculum; and using digital portfolios as tools for enhancing knowledge exchange between children, ECEC teachers, parents, and the community.

### **Research and Development**

Finland's fairly well-established academic research apparatus is multidisciplinary in nature, encompassing the fields of psychology, education, sociology, social work, health and welfare, sport sciences, cultural studies, politics, and media studies. Research is conducted by universities, research institutions, and government-funded bodies and organizations, such as the Academy of Finland. In 2014, the Academy established a Strategic Research Council (SRC) to provide funding for long-term and program-based research aimed at finding solutions to some of the major challenges facing Finnish society. The SRC

presently funds a national research consortium on ECEC focusing on potential sources of inequality in Finnish ECEC policies and strategies for overcoming them locally and nationally (Alasuutari, Repo, Karila, & Lammi-Taskula, 2017). Similarly, the Ministry of Education and Culture funds multiple research and development projects, such as recent work on strategies to promote young children's multi-literacies, in collaboration with university researchers, teacher educators, ECEC teachers, library and museum educators, and parents (Kumpulainen, 2017). The National Agency of Education also provides grants for development projects that aim to create scalable, applicable models, methods, and tools for early years education. In the international arena, Finland takes an active role in collaborative research, participating in projects such as the European CARE project on the effects of ECEC on child development (Melhuish et al., 2015).

### **Principles as Systemic Inputs**

Finland boasts a robust and unique approach to ECEC systems-building. Rather than a focus on individual systemic elements, Finland's core inputs are a set of transcendent values that permeate ECEC services and systems. Much like any system, these principles or systemic inputs work together seamlessly,

though they are teased apart in the following sections so as to make them transparent.

### **A Principled ECEC System**

The ideological orientation of the Finnish system sets ECEC deeply within a social welfare context. Finnish society and public policies largely rest on a Nordic welfare model, with a national social contract serving as the basis for universally available public services that aim to provide high-quality education and care for children and their families on fair and equal grounds. That services are provided to all, and that they are grounded in the fundamental principles of society, fosters trust in both the services themselves and in the institutions that provide them. Fundamentally, then, Finland builds its services to young children and their families on the platform of a principled social contract.

To live up to these principles, Finland has strong legislative, funding, and regulatory structures in place to support high-quality, equitably distributed, sustainable, and efficient ECEC services. The national policy definitions and national curricula on ECEC, as well as local policy definitions and plans, provide the basis for quality in Finnish ECEC. They build in mechanisms for both structural quality (e.g., adult-child ratios, high professional competence of teachers) and

process quality, most notably through the availability of a national core curriculum for ECEC based on holistic pedagogic goals, values, and approaches.

### **A Trusting ECEC System**

The Finnish ECEC system's basis in principles of equity and quality swaths it in a profound sense of trust: trust of and by government, and trust of and by families, teachers, and children. The citizenry assumes that the government will do its best to provide high-quality, equitable services. In turn, the government assumes that parents know and will do what is best for their children, and consequently provides an array of diverse services and supports for young families so they will have plentiful choices. From the time of a child's birth, the family leave system fosters flexibility for parents as they adapt to their changing life situation. Subsequently, while many forms of government-supported ECEC service arrangements exist, parents can also make use of various allowances to stay at home with their child, or enroll their child in publicly or privately organized ECEC services. Across all ECEC settings, families and parents have respect for teachers as professionals, and reciprocally, teachers respect the privileged position of parents with regard to their children. Finally, there is ultimate and abundant respect for the feelings, voices, and

expressions of young children. Manifest in the solicitation of children's opinions, the requirements that children participate in self-evaluation, and the premium placed on children valuing one another, the trust placed in young children echoes that which is placed in government, institutions, teachers, and parents.

### **A Personalized ECEC System**

The Finnish ECEC system is designed to meet the diverse needs of children and their families in various ways. Above all, choice abounds, with parents accorded the trust to select among options for themselves and their children. But personalization does not stop with choice. Inherent in the national curriculum frameworks is an individualized approach to supporting children's development. Most notably, each child has an IEP, developed through collaboration and agreement among teachers, parents, and children. Inherent in the Finnish ECEC system is an array of commitments by the government to universal services, with an expectation that such services will be personalized to meet the tailored goals and desires of individual families and children.

### **A Child-Centric ECEC System**

Beyond its historic and deep-seated commitment to education and ECEC and its principled, personalized, and trusting approach to delivery structure and policy frameworks, Finland is also noted for its adherence to child-centered pedagogy and practice. Finnish ECEC focuses on the intrinsic value of childhood and the positive development and well-being of children and families (Paananen, Kumpulainen, & Lipponen, 2015). Moreover, Finnish ECEC pedagogy stresses children's agency and the sociocultural nature of learning and development, with a focus on children's active interaction with peers, teachers, adults, community members, and the environment. This emphasis on children's agency also means that they are invited to participate in planning, creating, and evaluating their own activities and learning environments (Alasuutari, Karila, Alila, & Eskelinen, 2014; Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen, & Rainio, 2016; Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014). Enhancing children's trust in their own abilities and strengths as learners—through positive emotional experiences and opportunities for child-directed play, inquiry, and imagination—is regarded as an essential aspect of ECEC (Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Hilppö, & Mikkola, 2013).

### **Analysis and Recommendations**



Framed by the above principles, overall, ECEC services and the condition of young children in Finland are excellent, as children are provided ample opportunities to live, learn, and develop. Despite this grounding, Finland, like all countries, faces significant 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenges as it seeks to adapt to global trends and conditions. In recent years, growing immigration has brought increased ethnic, cultural, and language diversity to the country (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b). Compounding these demographic changes are troubling economic trends, such as rising child poverty rates, growing inequalities between the rich and poor, regional differentiation, and national budget shortfalls (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016; Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b). For the Finnish ECEC system, these shifting dynamics raise important questions, including how to best maintain and foster quality services across the country, how to attend to increasingly diverse family structures and needs, and how to promote the development and effective use of research and data. Each will be addressed below.

## **Fostering Quality Services**

### **Addressing Regional Differences in ECEC Services**

Changes in the economic conditions, mobility patterns, and family demographics that characterize Finnish society challenge the provision of high-quality ECEC services across the country. Finland is experiencing a rapid decline in the number of people living in remote, rural regions, with the majority of people now concentrated in the south, particularly in the Helsinki capital area (OECD, 2016d). This decreasing population density across Finland's vast geography puts pressure on the state's ability to fund and support public services across the country on fair and equal grounds. With growing variation in the quality and availability of ECEC services between and within municipalities (Karila et al., 2017), the government will need to develop innovative strategies to ensure that children across the nation have equal access to high-quality services.

### **Defining a Quality Framework**

Although municipalities monitor the quality of ECEC services, and teachers and children document ECEC practices and learning processes, Finland has no national criteria for ECEC program quality. The development of shared criteria will help promote strategic and systematic monitoring and development of ECEC program quality nationwide. Knowledge of areas of programmatic and geographic strengths and weakness would not only allow for resources to be targeted more effectively, but

would help guide the implementation and further development of ECEC programs throughout the nation.

### **Pre-service Education of ECEC Teachers**

Increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, economic challenges and accompanying austerity measures, and digitalization all challenge the competence of ECEC teachers and staff. Initial ECEC teacher education programs and student admissions to these programs need to be responsive to these changes so as to ensure the necessary 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills among the workforce. One strategy to address these societal developments is to attract more males and culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse people into the ECEC field by altering entrance requirements for teacher pre-service programs. Further, the curricula content of pre-service ECEC teacher education programs should be enhanced to better equip ECEC teachers to respond to increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms and to meet the needs of children and families in a digital and diverse society.

### **Retention**

More dedicated attention is needed to retain and motivate the existing ECEC workforce, and help teachers and staff update their professional competencies regularly. One strategy to reach

these goals would be to develop career and CPD pathways for all ECEC staff through the systematic use of personal professional development plans. Another strategy may be to increase the salaries of ECEC teachers to maintain and motivate a competent ECEC workforce.

### **Role Clarification**

At present, there are concerns that the roles of Finnish ECEC staff are blurred and undefined and that, in particular, the pedagogical leadership and expertise of ECEC teachers is underused (Onnismaa et al., 2015). While creating a balanced team of ECEC staff with different experiences and qualifications may be an effective and financially sustainable approach to producing quality in ECEC, carefully organizing the use of those different skills, knowledge, and competencies would help promote the efficient deployment of human talent. Such role clarification requires particular attention at different policy, practice, and administrative levels, both locally and nationally.

### **Attending to Diverse Families and Family Needs**

### **Reconciling Work and Family Life**

Although Finland performs well in international rankings of women's participation in working life (75.9%, compared to the OECD average of 71.3%) (OECD, 2017), there is evidence that the Finnish approach to combining work and family still has a gender skew and remains inflexible (Kosonen, 2014). Therefore, ECEC policies and family benefits need to be further developed to underscore the importance of fatherhood, encourage women's participation in working life, and reconcile paid employment and family life so that there is an adequate level of income for families with children. Strategies may include creating more flexibility for working hours and remote work, as well as combating gendered thinking regarding parenting and working life through media and public discourse.

### **Communication Strategy**

Increasing cultural and ethnic diversity in Finland, as well as changes in family structures, draw attention to the need to support all parents' understanding and decision-making in the face of the wide array of ECEC service options available (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b). For instance, Finland's growing immigrant community and growing population of single parents may require more targeted or culturally attuned information regarding the early years. The development of a dedicated national communication strategy designed to reach

diverse parents across Finland and support their awareness of the various services available to them, nationally and locally, would be a key first step. This communication strategy should define the roles of various settings (e.g., ECEC centers, health care and welfare clinics, community centers) in disseminating knowledge on ECEC services, and should create opportunities for diverse families to share their needs and concerns around ECEC so as to enhance responsive policymaking and promote the delivery of services that meet the needs of all children and their families.

## **Effective Use of Research and Data**

### **Enhancing Data-Driven Policy**

Despite Finland's growing body of academic research on early childhood pedagogy and development, far less research has focused on systemic issues related to ECEC services. For instance, the effectiveness of various organizational schemes, funding mechanisms (such as the home care allowance system), and women's workforce promotion strategies have received comparatively little attention (Karila et al., 2017). Because this inattention may stem in part from a misalignment between university researchers' areas of interest and the policy aims of the state, a nationally defined research agenda, resourced and

steered by the government, may encourage research projects with more direct relevance to policy objectives and practice in the field.

In the face of state budget constraints and an aging population (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017b), research on the efficient use of public funds for ECEC is increasingly necessary to inform social, education, and health service reforms. For instance, a national research agenda could promote program evaluations that examine how different types of ECEC services (e.g., in-home or family care options) and their financing mechanisms meet the government's aim of providing quality education and care to all children in Finland. A national research agenda or framework could also help streamline the process by which research is disseminated and translated into policy and practice. For example, a wider, more systemic, more strategic publication of research findings could enhance the knowledge base of best practice in ECEC policy, service development, and delivery.

### **Understanding the Effects of Increased Privatization**

Given the recent growth of the private ECEC sector in the face of long tradition of public provision, more research is needed to understand privatization's effects on quality, equality, opportunity, and sustainability of ECEC services for

children, their families, and society more generally. This need is particularly acute given the nation's shifting economic context. Despite decreasing poverty over the past 20 years, the child poverty rate is on the rise, and the gap between the rich and poor is now widening (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016), which may affect equity of access to private services. Findings from this case study will be critical for the future development and delivery of ECEC services that are attuned to Finnish values of providing care and education to every child, regardless of socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic background.

### **Conclusion**

Finland performs well on many indicators of development, with high efficiency in education (OECD, 2016c), high levels of literacy (Miller & McCenna, 2016), and low mortality rates in childbirth (OECD, 2016b). A deeply shared commitment to democracy and equality has enabled Finland to develop a world-class welfare and education system (Castells & Himanen, 2002; Miettinen, 2013). Driven in part by a small population size, Finland's policymakers have shown a dedication to investment in human capital and development, and hence in mainstream education, health, and welfare services, which has been critical



to ensuring the success of the information economy and overall survival and prosperity. The nation's commitment to early childhood—now shown by researchers to promote human capital, educational equity, social cohesion, and socioeconomic prosperity (Heckman, 2011; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2013)—has been a core element of Finnish society for decades.

The principled, personalized, trusting, and child-centered Finnish ECEC system is characterized by comprehensive and adaptive ECEC services available to all children and families, backed by a professional ECEC workforce. A quality ECEC program, guided by national core curricula, promotes local adaptation so as to be responsive to each child's learning and development in culturally and contextually sensitive ways. The unique features of the Finnish education system, including the intrinsic value it places on childhood and play, its "whole child"-centered approach to ECEC, and the trust it places in teachers' and institutions' self-accountability, instead of externally controlled, high-stakes testing and inspections, continue to attract international interest.

Nonetheless, Finland's ECEC policies and services are in a state of flux and face challenges that emanate from major societal, demographic, cultural, and economic changes. In parallel, global educational reform movements are introducing

new trends and principles to the Finnish ECEC system, emphasizing increased accountability, standardization, and privatization (Paananen et al., 2015). It is unclear how these trends—which largely contradict the fundamental beliefs that undergird the Finnish ECEC system—will unfold in the future. Consequently, the present story of a principled, personalized, trusting, and child-centric ECEC system of Finland must be read against the backdrop of a dynamic, continually evolving society.

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